

Message for Stewardship Sunday - 01/29/2023

By Dennis Perkins

Why do we do this anyway? Show up on Sunday? Serve on church committees or on the Board? Make coffee, bring snacks? And why, since this is Stewardship Sunday, do we share of our hard-earned money so these things can happen? Well, like about so many other things in my life—as my wife, my children and my friends will tell you—I have a theory. Let me explain.

Every spring for the last few years I have traveled north all the way up to the Canadian border to do a little fishing. I wish I could say that it was for the excitement of landing a trophy fish or for the sense of accomplishment in perfecting casting a fly, but neither would really be true. In fact, I have become a founding member of the SPCT: the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Trout. What I really go for is just the opportunity to stand thigh-deep in crystal clear rushing water. The stream or river sings as it rushes over the rocks in shallow sections. Sunlight dances like diamonds off the small waves and ripples of the moving water. A breeze creates a sough as it slides through the evergreen trees on the shore. And overhead, soft white clouds drift across the sky while hawks and eagles circle beneath them. That's why I go. The feathered hook is just an excuse.

One of these magical watery places way up north is the Allagash Waterway, known to fisherman across America if not the world. Fishing the lower Allagash, near the mouth of the river, raised my curiosity about the whole waterway and in my reading, I found that the Allagash Waterway begins at Telos Dam. What a find! I get more excited catching a word than I do a fish! I recognized the word and thus began a mental journey that took me back in time 2300 years.

Greek philosopher Aristotle was the first human who could accurately be described as a scientist, a person who looks at the real world to try and discover how it operates. He was the first to describe how objects, particularly man-made objects, artifacts, came into being. Aristotle said that every artifact had four causes: a material cause (the stuff out of which it is made), a formal cause (the design to create the object), the efficient cause (tools and worker to shape the materials according to the form intended) and a fourth cause—the least

apparent, yet most important: the purpose for the creation of the object—its final cause. In Greek the name of this final cause is its TELOS.

Let's look a simple example first. Picture a solitary 18th century settler in the forests of northern Maine, a young man, let's say. It's spring and he has been living in a small tent for the most part as he's journeyed north from Bangor. He loves what he sees around him—fresh water, abundant game and freedom, but he knows he's going to need something more permanent if he is survive the winter. He pictures a small log cabin with a stone fireplace and himself warm and dry as the cold Maine winter sets in. Further, he thinks maybe once the cabin is built, he could return next spring to Bangor and talk that young lady he's been interested in into accompanying him back up north. (This is Aristotle's final cause, the TELOS, already in operation before any work has commenced).

Next the man looks for the material from which to build his home. No problem there. Trees, boulders, moss and mud from the streams abound. (The material cause of his home-to-be.) He has brought a pack horse with him on whose back are carried an ax, a buck saw, hand saw, hammer, shovel—the efficient causes including his own muscles to shape the material (the efficient causes) according to the image of a simple cabin –walls, door, roof, fireplace and chimney. This image is the formal cause against which the cabin will come into being. So that before snow flies, the man has a place to live (his purpose, his final cause, materialized from hope into actuality through effort, persistence and necessary adjustments along the way.

And so, here we are this morning in this little sanctuary as well as the extended sanctuary created via Zoom and in many ways, we are not unlike the young pioneer just described. We too are seeking something that feels essential to us-- though not just for us but for everyone—a future that is safe, loving, vibrant and creative, that allows promise to be realized and so therefore enjoyed. That is our TELOS, our final cause, a feeling as much as a thought, final but also there at the beginning.

Like the image of a cabin which the young pioneer had in his head, we too have an image, an outline in our heads: the future we wish to build must first recognize the absolute importance of every man, woman and child—their innate dignity and value. Next, from this must spring justice, fairness and compassion between and

among human beings everywhere. Third, this future must foster the continual evolution of the human spirit as that spirit works to move beyond mere material satisfaction. Fourth, absolute honesty in scientific inquiry must be honored no matter what traditional oxen might get gored in its pursuit (Aristotle would like part particularly). Fifth, the belief that the best way forward will always eventually be revealed in equal and open discussion and participation must be trusted and fostered. Sixth, that the future must be not just for those few who by luck of birth were born into freedom and opportunity but must eventually be for all everywhere in the world. And finally, that this form of the future which we carry in our heads and in our hearts, must ultimately culminate in the understanding that every element of creation, every particle of the universe, lives in intimate connection with all the other elements and particles.

Our UU Principles of course are the formal cause with which we are working. But is it just pie-in-the-sky? Is it in fact simply hopeless? Not an idea of a simple log cabin but rather a castle in the air? That calls to mind an old Maine joke:

A car driving on a Maine back road pulls over stops next to a fence against which an old farmer is leaning. The passenger window rolls down and the driver leans across and asks the farmer, "Excuse me. How do you get to Vanceboro from here?"

The farmer scratches his chin and looks down the road in the direction the fellow was headed. "Well," he says. "You could go down there about two. . . No, no wait that's no good. That won't work." Then he looks down in the direction the fellow has just come from. "Maybe you could go back about . . . No, no, that's not gonna work, either."

Finally, he says, "You know, young feller, if I was going to go to Vanceboro, I wouldn't start from here."

Racial strife, war, illness, inequality, unfairness everywhere in our world, "perhaps you just can't get there from here." And yet the present is always where the future starts from. There is no other starting point.

This is what Emerson meant in his essay on Self-reliance, I think. "Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."

Good advice, I think, from one of the lights of the New England renaissance. Why are we here this morning being asked again to give of our time, our talent and our treasure? For the same reason our young man in northern Maine cut another

tree, lugged another boulder, rubbed aching muscles, swatted clouds of blackflies, beat back thoughts of, "It's just too hard. It can't be done. This isn't the right place. This isn't the right time for me to be doing this." He just kept creating a small trail that others would follow. He ultimately believed in the Telos that was driving him.

So please give generously again this year as this little church does its small part to, little by little, contribute to its dream of our world's future.